

Headwind - The Route Forbidden to Man

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The Human Village is running low on supplies, and so they send Reimu to pick some up from the city. She meets a tengu along the way.

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[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Chapter 1

The first time Reimu sees her is when she crosses the road.

They call it the Tengu Infestation, flocks of crow and packs of white wolf tengu migrating all the way from the city and settling into the road everyone uses to trade goods, now more commonly known as The Road. No one ever actually uses The Road anymore, though, simply because it's been known to house "murderous" white wolf hunters and "persistent" crows. Reimu doesn't really care, either way, because they at least stay out of her way when she ever sees one, but it probably isn't the same for the rest of the villagers.

Marisa tries to persuade her *not* to go, but when Reimu wants something, she gets it. Usually, anyway. The village is really running low on food, and as a shrine maiden who is very much un-shrine maiden-like, it's her responsibility to get the food. And anyway, if ever she comes into trouble, she's sure she can take care of whatever annoying youkai it is, tengu or no.

So when she's halfway across the road and getting a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, she comes into the scene.

A gust of wind, barely noticeable, but enough for Reimu to whip out her gohei instinctively, rushes by. The shrine maiden pauses in her steps, hunching down slightly to ready herself. Anything could happen. One shouldn't underestimate the tengu and their craftiness, much less the protector of her village.

"A human?"

Reimu flicks her wrist and sends three ofuda flying towards the voice's general direction. Two make a sharp *thunk*, and one elicits a girlish yelp. Only then does she turn around to glance way up at a tree, where an indistinguishable figure sits atop the branches.

The figure groans, straightening and hopping out of the branches and leaves, revealing a short-haired young woman... that is, if it isn't for the pair of black crow wings sprouting from her back. A *tengu*, Reimu realizes, the grip on her gohei tightening. "Ayayaya," the *tengu* speaks, rubbing her arm. "What'd you have to go and do that for?"

"You're a *tengu*, aren't you? I'm the local exterminator around here. You should probably just be glad I'm not on duty right now," Reimu replies as offhandedly as she can manage. She straightens from her position and glares right in the *tengu*'s eyes.

"What? It's not like I was going to rob you of all your stuff or anything!" the *tengu* says, her brow scrunching up, a defensive tone lacing her voice. "Hatake might do that if she gets desperate, though, so you might wanna stay away from her during the winter."

"I don't know who Hatake is, but..." The shrine maiden's eyes squint as she stares even harder at the *tengu*. A few moments of awkward silence pass before she speaks again. "Looks like you're not too dangerous right now. Alright. Name?"

"So demanding!" The *tengu* giggles. "What ever would you need my name for? I'm just another crow *tengu* to you humans, am I right?"

"Names are a part of the business. I'd like yours right now, if you may."

The *tengu* shakes her head. "Fine, fine, if you say so. Aya Shameimaru here, miss shrine maiden, may I have your name?"

Reimu hesitates. "Reimu of Hakurei."

"Hakurei, huh? I'll remember that." With a beat of her wings, Aya flits back up to her perch atop the branches, and winces at the ofuda in between Reimu's fingers. "I'm not going to hurt you yet."

"Yet." Her grip only tightens. "Why are you talking to me?"

"Well, you're the first human I've seen ever since I've come here, for one thing," Aya says, shrugging. "Humans don't come this far without being mauled by the wolves, so I'm always lonely..." She dips her head downwards, her bangs shadowing her crimson red eyes. A cheeky smirk crawls up her face. "Come here often?"

"Fuck off," Reimu grumbles, storing the ofuda back in her sleeve and lowering her gohei. "Is there anything else you want from me? Nothing? Then I'm going."

"Oh? You're in a hurry!" Without Reimu having even noticed it, Aya's in front of her once again, black feathers trailing behind her. "Look here, miss shrine maiden... Miss Reimu, that is. In case you hadn't noticed, I'm the guard for the halfway point in this road. I'm sorry, but I can't let you pass just like that."

"I was prepared for this, anyway," Reimu responds, and the sky is filled with the colorful sheets of danmaku.

The second time is when she *returns* from the city, and has to take The Road again.

Aya is waiting for her, the tears on her white blouse sewn up somehow and her bruises and burns patched up. There's also another smirk on her face, a smirk that makes her look like she knows all the answers to Reimu's questions, which only makes Reimu frustrated. "You again?"

"I told you I'm the guard of the halfway point," Aya says, flapping her wings in what could have been either excitement or impatience. "You might as well give me a title. The Halfway Guard. Something with 'guard' in it. I trust you can do that, Miss Reimu?"

"More like the Annoying Crow Tengu Who Bothers the Shrine Maiden," Reimu mutters, readying her gohei.

When Reimu comes back relatively unharmed and with food in hand, Marisa all but *begs* her to do it again, and if possible, get rid of the white wolves who keep terrorizing The Road. Reimu, with a wry grin, tells her to do it herself if she really wants to, but knows the most she can do is to teach them a lesson. Right now, though, she's worn-out from fighting Aya twice - tengu are still pretty strong, and she's sure Aya had been holding back - and walking all the way over to the city from The Road. So she decides to take the rest of the day off and leave Keine to handle the rest.

Having heard of the news, the rest of the people in the Human Village are getting riled up and overconfident once more, thinking they can probably take on the tengu in The Road. Reimu doesn't actually care too much on what they decide to do, since whether they go or not has nothing to do with her welfare or Marisa's, but it'd be a chore to have to exterminate the tengu because of the disappearances. If she could, she'd get Keine to do it, but she knows the half-youkai wouldn't stand a chance against Aya, simply due to the fact that the crow tengu is definitely stronger than she lets on. It's annoying, of course, that she has to do everything herself under the white wolf tengu decide to back off, but she can probably beat them up enough for them to stop bothering the humans in the village. Any more and she'd start running out of followers and donors, however small.

So of course, it's a giant surprise when Aya herself decides to visit the shrine maiden.

It's on a completely ordinary day when it happens, with Reimu sweeping the shrine grounds and pondering on what she's going to have for dinner that evening, when a strong gust of wind rushes by. Reimu tenses and tightens the grip on her broom, ready to swing it in place of her gohei. Is it a youkai ambush? Things like those aren't uncommon, especially since the number of competent guards manning the village gates have been dwindling. Which one is it this time? A bird-type youkai, most likely...

The sharp *click* of a camera going off echoes in the empty space.

Reimu whirls around and sends a flurry of ofuda straight towards the source of the sound, but they all disappear without hitting their target. The shrine maiden grits her teeth and looks up at the tree she had heard the sound from, where Aya perches, a maple leaf fan clutched in her outstretched hand. "Miss Reimu of Hakurei! Greetings, what a coincidence meeting you here."

"Coincidence? Please." She scoffs. "This is the Hakurei Shrine. There's no such thing as a meeting with the shrine maiden of Hakurei being coincidental here."

"Don't be so harsh on me. I'm just a reporter running a newspaper, nothing so gory like the white wolf hunters." Black wings flap, and Aya touchdowns on the ground lithely without so much as a sound. Leaves flutter in the wind. "I'm not here to fight you today, Miss Reimu, so if you may, you can lower your weapon now."

The shrine maiden tosses the broom away, leaving it to skid across the floor. "If you're not here to donate yen, or whatever your currency is, then leave. If one of the humans sees a youkai, much less a *tengu*, hanging around the shrine, what do you think they'll think of me then? They'll probably drive me away with torches and pitchforks and call me a traitor, etcetera."

Aya shakes her head. "Come on, you don't think I can't look relatively normal, do I? See here--" and with that, her wings disappear in a flutter of black feathers, and her crimson red eyes abruptly darken, now passing off as a particularly reddish brown, like the color of dried blood. "Don't I look more... hmm, human, now?"

"Your tokin hat and those sandals of yours are still going to be considered atrocious for a human, and this village isn't big. Everyone knows the other here, and newcomers are big news." Reimu's eyes narrow. "What do you want, dirty *tengu*?"

"What's so wrong about wanting to visit a friend?" Aya cocks her head to the side, like a cat. "I told you, didn't I? Humans don't come to the road often, much less reach all the way to the halfway point, where I guard. You're the first human I've seen since I arrived here. It only makes sense for me to want to take a better look at you, right?"

Friend? Is she serious? "How did you get here?"

Aya blinks. "Through the skies?"

The corner of Reimu's lips curl downwards.

"Fine, fine! I flew in here, of course. Well, most of the way in, at least. Decided to stop by and have a nice chat with one of the guards. Gentlemanly person, he is, but I like princesses more than knights in shining armor." The crow tengu winks.

It throws Reimu completely off-kilter. She has no idea *why* her face is flushing this much, but now that she looks at Aya properly, she can't say she wholly dislikes what she sees. She'd almost define the crow tengu as physically appealing, or in Marisa's blunter words, *hot*. But of course, she's the local youkai exterminator in the village, and therefore is *not* meant to be seen acting friendly to a tengu, much less think of one as pleasing to the eyes. She summons one of the Hakurei Yin-Yang Orbs threateningly, smirking at Aya's wince. (And yet, she feels almost guilty about it.)

"Go flirt with your own kind. I've no business with you, and you to me. Leave."

The crow tengu falters in her words, before setting her gaze in a stony mask. Her wings sprout from her back, larger and somehow looking more dangerous with them blocking out the sun as she rises into the sky. Ruby eyes flash. "Of course, shrine maiden."

It takes Reimu a moment to realize Aya hadn't said 'miss', but by then, the crow tengu is long gone. A trail of black feathers lie in their wake. The shrine maiden retrieves her broom and sweeps it up, but

picks a particularly long plume from the ground and tucks it in her pocket.

A week or two passes after that, throughout which Reimu repeatedly finds black feathers scattered everywhere around the shrine grounds. She dutifully sweeps them all away, in case Marisa or one of the villagers see one and immediately proclaim it as one of the crow tengu's, even though there are plenty of black birds in the sky. Nevertheless, she cleans it up anyway, just to be safe.

It's embarrassing, but she almost *misses* the crow tengu. Sure, Marisa visits often, but Reimu's taken to looking up at the sky, expecting to see perhaps a black and white blur, or hear the beating of wings, or maybe feel a sharp gust of wind to signify the arrival of Aya. It, of course, never happens, but it's not like she can stop now. It's turned into an annoying habit which even Marisa's caught on to.

"Sky again, huh?" the witch says, one day, when she walks into the shrine maiden gazing up at the wide, blue expanse above them.

Reimu grunts, not really listening to Marisa at all, before returning to her chore of sweeping the shrine grounds. It's not actually dirty, but it gives her an excuse to go outside.

Marisa nods, a deadpan expression on her face. "Right." She sighs. "Nyway, food's running low again. You don't think you could run over to the city and get us some more?"

Pause. "I..." It's exactly what she's been waiting for, but she tries not to show it. Taking a deep breath, she turns around to properly face the witch and nods. "No problem. Tell Keine to handle the village while I'm not here. I might as well take my time on this occasion."

"Met someone in those fancy-ass buildings, did'ja?" Marisa peers inside the shrine and cries out. "You got yourself a kotatsu?! Awesome!"

"Don't hog it."

It's getting colder, Reimu supposes. She heads back into the shrine and starts sifting through her dusty winter clothes from last year.

This time around, she crosses paths with one of the white wolves. It's not a pleasant one.

Her intuition tells her to turn around seconds before she hears the first growl, and so she does, summoning the Yin-Yang Orb and sending it crashing right on the tengu's face. She howls, tumbling backward, but recovers quickly and lunges at Reimu, sending waves of danmaku towards her with the scimitar she grips in her hand. Reimu grazes the colored bullets with ease, shooting her own, until their surroundings are burnt black and the sky is filled with bright orbs and the occasional flying ofuda.

The finishing blow is made by Reimu, with her gohei. She smashes it down on the tengu's face, on the exact spot where the Yin-Yang Orb had first hit, and sends her falling to the ground.

The shrine maiden patiently waits until the wolf tengu sits back up, face bruised and one eye turning a nasty shade of purple. "I haven't been beaten in a while," the tengu remarks, face set in a glare. Reimu returns it, all too eager.

"Name?"

"Momiji Inubashiri. You're the protector of the nearby village, I assume."

"That I am. It's Reimu. Any reason you tengu are hunting down the humans who come here?"

Momiji sighs and looks to the side. "Our previous territory was taken over by the dominating oni and kappa working together. We didn't stand a chance. Lord Tenma gathered the survivors and led us here,

mostly isolated and where we can attack humans and make our presence known again. We're trying to take this road over and make it our new homeland, and expand if we can, by taking over the surrounding villages and the city just near here." She shrugs. "Our numbers are lowering, and our plans aren't working as hoped. We're just trying to make a living here."

Reimu takes a moment to process it, then nods. "If you promise not to attack any of the villagers that cross this road, we'll send you weekly amounts of food. We'll name it, and we can adjust it from there. We'll keep it simple, alright?"

A shuffling noise, and the wolf tengu is back on her feet, however unsteady. "I'll refer it to Lord Tenma. We'll send the message back through one of the crows." Then she's off, disappearing into the overgrowth. The last Reimu sees of her is the tip of her white tail.

The shrine maiden sighs, pinches the bridge of her nose, and continues on her way. There's still a long road to go.

Unexpectedly enough, she doesn't see Aya when she gets to the halfway point.

Instead, a brunette crow tengu is there, perched atop the branches of the tree Aya had been on, nibbling some baked potatoes and looking over at what looks like a yellow-checkered phone. When Reimu passes by, the tengu's brown eyes flicker over to her, and she's in front of the shrine maiden in a blur.

"Reimu of Hakurei, right? Aya's told me about you," the tengu says, scoffing lightly. "You don't look much. And this is who beat my subordinate? I'll have to talk to her about this."

"And you're...?"

"Hatake Himekaidou," she declares proudly, crossing her arms over her chest. A calligraphy pen keychain dangles off her cellphone. "Aya

isn't present at the moment, though she never is these days. Are you trying to cross the road?"

Reimu pauses. *Aya's never around?* "Do you know where--"

"Where Aya's gone?" Hatake shrugs. "No one does. Tricky little fink, she is, always doing her own thing and leaving me to do her job." She grumbles a little more under her breath. "Anyway, you didn't answer the question, but that's fine. I have a new one. What's your business with Aya? Are you two sweethearts?"

"Nothing of the sort." The thought makes Reimu want to puke, and at the same time, makes her heart jump. She pushes it back down and continues. "I've just been seeing a lot of black feathers around my shrine. That's all."

"Sounds like she's been stalking you. She tends to do that." Hatake looks away, a tint of red coloring her cheeks. "Anyway, I'm the substitute guard of the halfway point until she comes back. Well?"

They engage in battle. The brunette isn't anything difficult, though Reimu wasn't expecting her to be. At least the tengu is somewhat polite - she sits up from her defeated position and bids the shrine maiden goodbye.

When she returns to the shrine, Aya, *of all people*, is sitting on the roof. Marisa is sleeping inside the shrine, half-buried under the kotatsu, snoring loudly, and Reimu is only all too thankful.

"Shrine maiden," Aya says, nodding curtly, with naught a hint of emotion in her tone. Reimu stiffens involuntarily. "I've come to deliver a message from Lord Tenma."

"Does it concern the agreement?"

"That it does." Aya tips her head downwards before extracting a rolled-up sheet of paper from behind her. "A contract, if you will. Sign

it, along with the hakutaku, and we can arrange a proper peace treaty between the tengu of the road and the people of this village."

Reimu nods and gets ready to fly up to accept the contract, but the crow tengu has already appeared in front of her, tengu sandals just barely touching the ground. Aya's expression remains the same. Reimu takes the contract and quickly signs her signature at the bottom of the paper, next to what looks like the Lord Tenma's signature, then takes the time to read it over. It's exactly as Aya says, without too much a hint of fine print. Anyway, if there is, Keine would notice, so it isn't too much trouble. "Oh. Aya?"

The crow tengu glances back to look at Reimu.

"I passed by Hatake a while ago. She said you were always away?"

Aya nods. "What of it?"

"... Nothing," Reimu responds, without really meaning it at all. She mutters a hasty goodbye before running off to let Keine sign it.

When she returns, the only sign of Aya ever being there is the black feather lying on the ground. Reimu picks it up and stuffs it in her pocket, then flies back up to clean the roof.

"A peace treaty?" Marisa cocks her head. It reminds Reimu too much of Aya. "Well, that's good, I guess. Least we aren't gonna have too many murder cases being filed against the wolves again. And hey, maybe this'll net you more followers!"

"Maybe." Reimu looks up at the sky and sighs. "They didn't tell me who to give the contract back to... guess I'm going to have to take The Road again."

So she does. Momiji is waiting, funny enough, by the edge, resting her chin on the edge of her palm as she balances her elbow on her knee in an Indian sit. Reimu doesn't see her scimitar anywhere, but

she's fairly sure it's still there, somewhere, much like Aya's maple leaf fan. Once the wolf tengu sees her, she stands up and brushes dirt and dust off her dress. "Reimu Hakurei. Has the contract been signed?"

"It has." She presents it to Momiji, folded up as properly as it had been a day ago.

Momiji nods approvingly. "I'll deliver this to Lord Tenma and arrange a meeting between you two. We can make everything official to both parties. You may want to invite the hakutaku... Keine Kamishirasawa as well, and anyone else you may deem important. It's been our first treaty in a while, since the kappa and oni takeover, so we'd like everything to be as organized as it can."

"I understand." Reimu pauses, and Momiji moves to dash away, but the shrine maiden interjects; "Hold on. I want to ask something about... Aya."

"Aya Shameimaru?" the wolf tengu's nose wrinkles in disdain. "What about her? Is she annoying you or anything? It might explain her inexplicable disappearances..."

"That's it. I mean... her disappearances, or whatever. Hatake mentioned it too." Reimu sighs. "I've been finding black feathers everywhere around my shrine recently, and I think they're coming from Aya. What do you think?"

"It's likely. She's been talking Hatake's ear off everyday about something or other. I don't listen it, so maybe you should go ask her about it yourself." Momiji shrugs. "If there's nothing else, I'll be off."

"Aya?" Brown eyes narrow. "Yeah, she's been talking about you for some time. Dunno why, don't really care either."

Reimu sighs. "This is annoying. I piss her off one day and then she never talks to me about other matters besides the treaty. And she

keeps leaving black feathers around my shrine. It's getting pretty annoying cleaning it all up."

Hatake giggles girlishly. "She likes you plenty, don't worry about *that* . Every day she comes back to our nest and goes on and on about something new about you. If you're getting tired of cleaning up for her, *I'm* getting tired of hearing about you."

Reimu hesitates. There are two points she wants to address in the brunette's statement, so she decides on the slightly more (read: less) important one. "You share... a nest?"

"Nestmates, we're not a couple," Hatake answers, like she's all too used to the question. She doesn't even look the least bit bothered. "She only stays with me because I actually worked hard on making my nest. All cozy and warm and *not* for space-hoggers like her." She mutters something unintelligible under her breath, before raising her gaze back up towards Reimu. "Anything else? You crossing this road again?"

"Not today," Reimu says, already turning on her heel to return to the village and await Momiji (or Aya, which she's hoping for, even though she doesn't know why). "Thanks for the info, Hatake."

"Good luck with Aya's drama with you."

Back at the shrine, Reimu comes face-to-face with Aya, and this time, she doesn't have her professional expression on. Rather, it's one of curiosity, however hidden. The crow tengu is perched atop the shrine roof again, swinging her legs like a child, the wind blowing around her like a faithful friend. "Hello, Reimu."

"Dropped the miss, did you?"

Aya looks down, expression still blank. "Do you hate me?"

Reimu pauses. The question had been so sudden she couldn't formulate an answer quickly enough. "I... sorry?"

"I haven't given you many reasons to like me," Aya starts. "I flirted with you, and fought with you, and I leave messes all over your shrine. I've only helped you once, with the peace treaty. And you told me to leave, some weeks ago." She stops. "Do you hate me?"

Silence hangs in the air like overcast clouds.

The shrine maiden grumbles and makes an irritated noise. "I don't hate you. Too much. You could say I kind of tolerate to you."

Aya blinks.

"I don't like it either, alright? It makes me feel like some creep, or maybe some old dude who preys on little girls. Though I know you're about a thousand years old, but it's the same thing. I look up at the sky everyday and think, hey, maybe she'll come today. Maybe she'll be in a better mood than last time. It doesn't happen. This kind of freaky obsession's never happened before, you know?" Reimu turns away, gritting her teeth. "Maybe if you promise to never come again, I'll stop looking up at that stupid sky and get my hopes up."

Another drawn-out silence passes by, and just when Reimu's sure the crow tengu's left with a beat of black wings, Aya's voice speaks up. "Uh, I have a confession to make, and I have been kind-of-maybe-probably stalking you."

Reimu whirls around to face the crow tengu with a red face. "What?"

Aya flushes. "Um, I didn't realize it happening until it became a normal thing. Your shrine has a nice and peaceful atmosphere and I really like it here even though I'm not allowed to enter this kind of place, but it just makes me feel so... relaxed, is the word, I think. Even better than my nest, sometimes. And it's getting colder, after all, so sometimes I hang around in your kotatsu when you're

outside..." She shifts nervously. "I clean up after myself if I go in the shrine, but I often, uh, miss a few feathers outside, huh."

"You don't say." She *wants* to narrow her eyes, but the crow tengu's shy look isn't making it any easier. Reimu forces herself not to think of how she looks kind of, dare she say it, *cute*. "Nice and peaceful, huh?"

Aya smiles slightly, a glint in her eye. "It might be because of you. Have I told you you're a tad too pretty for me to forget?"

The shrine maiden pauses, grumbles something unintelligible, and stomps her way into her shrine. She can just *feel* her face burning and oh Dragons, she is a full-grown woman, not a hormonal fifteen-year-old.

She pours tea for two.

"In summary," Tenma's advisor concludes. "The tengu of the road will be forbidden to attack or harm the people of the Human Village in any way whatsoever. In return, they will be given weekly amounts of food and will be allowed to enter the village when they please. The villagers will not be allowed to hunt down the tengu of the road as well, for we no longer mean you harm. If possible, we will work together to expand our territory and aid us in recreating our once-large and prosperous civilization."

"Sounds 'bout right," Tenma says, nodding. She raises her arm in the air. "Anything else, Hakurei, Kamishirasawa?"

Reimu shakes her head. Keine hesitates, before doing the same.

Tenma smiles lightly. It's a genuine smile this time, unlike the various smirks of the tengu around them. It's almost unnerving. "Alright. Meeting adjourned! Hope to see y'all getting along."

As soon as Reimu steps foot outside of the large alcove in the tree (she had had *no* idea making that was possible, but there it is), a black and white blur swoops downwards from the sky and just barely avoids knocking the shrine maiden to the ground. Reimu lets out a curse and whips out her gohei, Yin-Yang Orbs whirling around her in anticipation, but she's only met with a politely confused smile from the familiar face.

"Ayayaya," the tengu exclaims, resting her chin on her hand casually. "You're always so hostile when we meet, mm?"

Mumbling incoherently, Reimu flicks her wrist and the Yin-Yang Orbs disappear. She doesn't let go of her gohei, though. Just in case. "I suppose I can't really hurt you anymore."

"And I to you." Aya smiles. "Since we tengu are allowed in your village now, does that mean I can visit you everyday without worrying about appearances and methods?"

"Don't leave feathers all over my house and I'll consider it."